

# Limiting Senate on appointments not likely to fly

Gov. Scott McCallum recently suggested limiting the time the state Senate has to act on gubernatorial appointments.

McCallum is annoyed that there are now 185 appointees awaiting confirmation. Among those on that list are six members of the nine-person Board of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. Four University of Wisconsin regents are in the same situation.

In addition, 102 of the 185 appointees are still awaiting committee hearings, including two nominated in 1999, some two dozen in 2000, another 24 in 2001, a total of 24 in January and February of 2002 and 39 nominated after March 1.

Among those not confirmed is first lady Laurie McCallum. She was appointed to the Labor and Industry Review Commission by former Gov. Tommy Thompson shortly before he resigned last year. Laurie McCallum had served as a member of the state Personnel Commission for nearly two decades on appointments by Republican Gov. Lee Dreyfus, Democratic Gov. Tony Earl, and then Thompson.

Gov. McCallum suggested that a task force study the possibility of giving the Senate only 160 days in which to act on nominations. Without action, the appointments would be automatically confirmed, the governor proposed.

The Legislature is unlikely to accept such an idea even if the task force recommends such a change. Legislators have historically preferred delay to outright rejection in controversial cases.

In 1962, the Republican-controlled Senate was stunned when voters elected Democrat John Reynolds as governor. Reynolds defeated GOP leader Phil "Buzz" Kuehn by 11,955 votes. That was the same election in which Republicans picked up two state Senate seats, giving the GOP a 22-11 margin.

The Republicans were furious at the election outcome — just as upset as later GOP bigwigs were when Al Gore narrowly won Wisconsin's presidential vote in 2000.

But the Republican senators decided that rather than let Reynolds' appointees be embarrassed by a rejection vote, they voted to "return" scores of them to the governor's office.

**Matt Pommer**

The senators felt assured, correctly, that this was then a Republican state and the voters would come home in 1964. In the midst of the Goldwater presidential election candidacy, Republican Warren Knowles ousted Reynolds from the governor's chair.

In the last 40 years, only five people have been formally rejected by the state Senate.

They are:

■ George Otto, who would have been appointed to the Industrial Commission in 1963.

■ Charles Stoddard to the Natural Resources Board in 1972.

■ Dom Gordon to the Council on Domestic Abuse in 1988.

■ Terry Kohler to the UW Board of Regents in 1992.

■ Francis "Bill" Murphy to the Natural Resources Board in 1999.

Gubernatorial nominees can serve in a vacant position even without being approved by the Senate. That includes the current unconfirmed agriculture board and Board of Regents appointees.

The idea of reducing the power of the legislative branch over appointments is unlikely to be attractive to either political party. Republicans have held the governor's office for 16 years, but public opinion polls suggest Democrats may have a chance in this year's election.

Given that polling, Republican senators may not be eager to abandon the power to reject, or just slow down, a gubernatorial appointment.

Tommy Thompson dramatically strengthened the executive's powers in 14 years. Even his fellow Republicans may think he did too much — if the governor who happens to move into the Executive Residence next January is a Democrat.